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**Pentecost 19 B, September 29, 2024**

**“The Needle’s Eye”**

**Read: Mark 9: 38 – 50 and/or memorize: Mark 9: 50**

**There is no mistake, this is a hard weekend to preach on, if you're using the Gospel to guide you. Jesus is telling us that if something causes us to sin, we ought to cut it off or pluck it out.**

**Now, we want to remember Jesus was often given to double–edged sayings, paradoxes, and extreme comparisons. He spoke ironically, and often with biting humor. Jesus uses the images of cutting off a hand, a foot or plucking out an eye to warn us about something vital: the danger of overt sin.**

**Our text begins with the disciples concerned about protecting their turf. We all have those places that we will go to great lengths to defend against encroaching threats. In this case, the disciples came across a man who was healing people, specifically driving out demons in the name of Jesus, but wasn't a disciple.**

**Because he was not one of the hand-picked ones, they told him to stop. They were proud of themselves for doing that. But Jesus’ responded with an unexpected twist. He tells them if the man is not against them, then he is for them. Even more so, sooner or later, he will not be able to speak against the work of Jesus. Even a cup of water given in Jesus’ name merits reward.**

**Perhaps, you've had this kind of experience. I know I have. There are groups who will not accept a person as a Christian unless they've had an experience exactly identical with the one shared by that group. I can remember being asked by someone, "Are you saved?" My response was that I was. That I've been a Christian all of my life.**

**But that wasn't good enough for them. They felt I needed to know the exact day and time that I was “saved.” I gave them my baptismal date. I didn't have a time, but that wasn't good enough. In their minds, unless I knew a date and a time, and had an experience like theirs, then, it was obvious I wasn't saved. Thank God I’m secure in my faith because they were trying to introduce doubt into my mind.**

I can imagine the conversation between these folks and Jesus. He would say, "There are lots of people out there doing kindly deeds in my name. If they keep up these good works, soon they will be unable to speak ill of me. After all, if the person is not against us, he is for us." I imagine him going on to tell the disciples that they need to be reasonable. They should show some common sense. "How can you expect the cause to grow," Jesus says, "if you don't invite new people in? They will grow into a closer relationship with us." That probably is a good lesson for all of us to remember.

That was the easy part of our text. Now we want to deal with the hard part. Jesus' admonition to cut off the hand, foot or pluck out the eye, if these body parts cause us to sin. Warning that it is better for us to enter eternal life lame, maimed or blind, then keep all the parts and go to hell.

Of course, Jesus is using this hyperbolized, and very dramatic images, to convey the central truth: "Going to hell is not a matter of being excluded from the right group. Going to hell is a matter of having two good hands, two good feet and too good eyes – and still not using them for the work of God." What good are body parts, if we're not using them to serve Him?

What is the sense of being physically whole, which Judaism thought was very important, when we are spiritually maimed? This leads to the third part of our text, salt. To be salted, is to be fully alive, vital, and filled with the Spirit. Such a person stimulates life in others.

Sprinkled with just enough of self and ego, a zesty sparkle manifests itself whenever the person comes to be known. Once more, a not-so-subtle lesson: the salt in us is tested by the actions it sparks. Unless our salt is salting, it is of no consequence. We are to be people who bring life alive in the world around us.

Here are instances in which Jesus underscored qualities of life familiar to all of us: gentleness, helpfulness, serving, caring, and encouraging. In fact, in some ways, Jesus seems to hold these qualities to be more pertinent to human growth than belonging to the right group, holding proper theological beliefs or an exact catalog of experience. He wants us to be alive, causing life to blossom wherever we may be.

These daily qualities, highly prized by Jesus and readily desired by us, seem to be hard to acquire. How do we get them? Let's look closely at the parable of losing the hand, foot and eye. Perhaps it contains the key to entering into the fellowship of Jesus. If we are tempted to steal, we might cut off a hand to prevent us from stealing. Does that stop us from thievery? Of course not!

**Thieving is in the soul. Sooner or later, we will devise another way to steal.** Computer crime can be done with one finger. Stock markets can be rigged over lunch. Corruption, fraud, and graft require only clever minds, a few good connections and a devious smile. With the literal loss of a hand, we still rob, showing that the flaw lies, not in the hand, but in the soul that motivates it.

Suppose our sin is to run away from problems, leaving behind pregnant wives, disappointed friends and saddened churches. If we cut off a foot, does that stop us from running away? Hardly. Avoidance lies in the soul. We discover that we can run away from our responsibility simply by sitting idly by, keeping silent when there is a need, being uncaring and ignoring cries for help that come to us and demanding more and more from others. The flaw lies not in the runaway feet, but in the soul that motivates them

By looking, we are tempted to lust. Suppose we pluck out an eye, does that stop us from lusting? Lusting, too, is in the soul. In the early days of the monastic movement, hermits scattered throughout the desert, thinking that if they could not see an object of lust, they would not lust. Sounds rather simple, doesn't it?

But they carried with them ingrained, explicit sexual fantasies, which filled their souls when there was nothing physical to look upon. The flaw lies, not in the seeing, but the in the soul that looks upon its own fantasies.

**The reality is, nothing that we do externally prevents us from sinning.** Jesus uses hyperbole to teach us the real task of moving away from the self-destruction of our soul. What else is it than self-destruction when, having two good hands, feet and eyes, we risk hell? Although hell seems far away, having a craven self-seeking soul is with us all the time, impossible to avoid, and it isolates us from giving our best.

**Jesus yearns for us to see that the problem lies deep in our souls where our private wills take over and prevent us from seeing, doing and being.** Of course, He's using hyperbole. Jesus would hardly counsel amputation! Rooting out the real flaw requires deep soul-searching. People wallowing in self-love cannot get to heaven until they drop the most interior source of sin, which might mean they must go through the needle's eye. All that encumbers the soul must be exorcised.

Human cleverness is well pictured in a television ad shown a long time ago, but perhaps you remember it. A pilot is flying the military plane. He reaches up to take a soft drink out of its cradle, but it will not come loose. A nearby pilot sees his predicament and taunts him by pulling out his own can of soda. The first pilot turns his plane upside down, pops the can open and collects the drink in a glass, taunting back, as if saying, "Look at me!"

**In all of our destructive traits, we find ways around impediments to do them. Angry people keep on being angry, even when it does them no good. They try argumentation, criticism, and finally, sarcastic sweet despising. When all of those don't accomplish what they want, they may turn to violence.**

**They will turn the upside down to get their way. Liars keep on lying; thieves, keep on stealing; lusts keep on lusting; people who live on excuses just keep on. . . all the while, these people get better and better at their skills because the sin is in the soul.**

**It is at the Cross of Christ, that the real source of sin is challenged for what it is, a burden. The burden of our souls rolls away. And what is this burden? Our chief, prized possession, the self. No true life, salted and effective, no genuine disciple with a relationship with Jesus, no healing of our flaws, and especially no physical, mental, or spiritual health, none of these can be ours, so long as we cling to the self. We could never be salt for the world when the essence of self is a carefully guarded and protected private possession, to be served at our own pleasure, never counting the expense of others.**

**Only my self do I bring to the cross, my self – will and selfishness, ego and vanity, my subtle ways of keeping on with my desires. At the cross, I make a gift of myself to God. Then at last I can accept God's gift to me in Jesus Christ.**

**With that acceptance, I am set free. Free to receive and enjoy God in Christ, myself and others. My hands, feet and eyes are able to serve the highest interest without being deflected by my narrow willfulness. I can, at last, share the salt in me with others, sprinkling the world around me. Free at last from sin, I can now use my hands, my feet and my eyes to serve Jesus, carrying the Good News to all and beholding His glory.**

**Count me in: How will you use your physical body to serve Jesus?**